

## Elko the Potter

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Franz Kafka looked at his small, elite group of 22nd century students and tapped on the large text display with his pointing stick. "The decisive moment in human development is a continuous one," he said, reading his own words. "For this reason the revolutionary movements which declare everything before them to be null and void are right, for nothing has yet happened."

The students fidgeted. One, a young man with so many freckles it looked painful, raised his hand. Kafka nodded, and the youth spoke up. "Sir Oscar Wilde said, 'History is merely gossip.'"

Kafka took a step toward the student, pointing the stick right at him. "Precisely!" he said, his voice betraying only a echo of his former accent. "That is precisely my point!"

#

A half mile away, Professor Raymond Burns was looking directly into history.

He was searching for carts.

They came from here, he was sure of it. Raymond had tracked the carts all up and down the region and they always came from here. After all, it made sense; the area between the rivers was famous as being the cradle of civilization. The muddy waters and the fertile desert land just begged to be mixed, and the local villages listened. Irrigation was developed, and with it came more food than the farmers could possibly use. This led to the gift of idle time. Time to ponder, time to experiment. Villages became cities, and cities became city-states.

There came kings and gods and law.

The image that was broadcast directly to Raymond's optic nerves caused a stinging pain. There was a specially developed endorphin to counter this side effect, but it wore off quickly. The pain distracted Raymond, but he was perpetually putting off another dose for just one more minute...

He worked the controls, slowing the temporal scan. It was right about here. Going forward through time, slowing the rate,

slowing so that he could see the passage of humanity through the stinging hell of the retinal linkage. There were no carts at all, and then suddenly they were everywhere! It was like there had been an explosion of carts.

He reversed the scan, going backwards through time. Below his disembodied eyes the city deteriorated into a village of mud huts, and the bronze plow devolved to copper and then to a curved stick. The men and women carried their harvest in by hand in large baskets. There was not a wheel in sight. Wearily, Raymond flipped the controls forward again. This was taking forever.

For seven long years Raymond had been waiting for this chance, and now he had only three days to accomplish it. Two of those three days were already gone, and this last one was rapidly coming to a close. Behind Raymond there was a long line of others who waited for their turn at the temporal viewer, each with their own pet projects. If Raymond didn't make his discovery within the next few hours, it would probably never happen.

Through the haze of pain he watched it happen again. An explosion of carts. He reversed the controls again and watched, scanning slower than ever, trying to trace the progress. It had to have begun here. Somewhere.

And then --- suddenly! --- he spotted it. He stopped the temporal scan, freezing the image. Raymond was so elated he giggled like a madman. "That's it! That's it that's it!" he yelled out loud. They were beautiful --- the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. Four round bricks drying in the hot summer sunlight. Four bricks that would forever change the history of mankind.

#

Elko, a Sumerian potter living on the banks of the Euphrates, had this reoccurring feeling that he was being watched. It would come and go, and sometimes he forgot about it altogether, but then sometimes he could be all alone and it was like someone was above him looking down. He attributed it as the attention of the gods. His own father thought him a fool, so maybe the gods did too, and Elko was providing them with amusement.

Elko, son a farmer, heir to a long line of the most successful farmers anyone had ever known, had turned down the family trade to play with mud. That's how Unko, his father, would put it. Playing with mud. Unko saw water as the power, water flowing through their hand-dug ditches, irrigating the fields. Man controlling the power of water from the great Euphrates.

Elko firmly believed it was not the water, it was the dirt. The water merely followed where the dirt directed it. Hand-built levees, hand dug ditches --- it was the dirt.

Control the dirt. Mold the soil into shapes from the mind's imagination. Anything was possible!

His father couldn't argue that his son wasn't making a good living --- he was. Elko worked as a potter, trading his bowls and vessels for food and clothing, and he lived in a large home made from sun-hardened bricks he made himself. He had a good woman and they were soon expecting a child. Everyone outside his immediate family held him in high regard as a man of ideas.

"Look at you! You call this work? You could be out growing food, building aqueducts! Instead you sit in this fancy hut of yours and play with mud. It's like you never grew up."

"Father, what would you store your grain in if you didn't have my vessels? They'd still be in a heap under a blanket, being eaten by birds, rats, and bugs."

"Making pots is a woman's job."

It was useless. No matter what he did, Elko couldn't convince his father that what he was doing was useful. Despite his success, this bothered him, and sometimes he lie awake at night trying to think of a way to change his father's mind.

It came to him on one of those days when he felt he was being watched, while he was busy filling an order of 24 vessels for Yurdmal the Trader. Elko had fashioned a round table that he could spin by kicking at thick pegs radiating from the base. The whole table was very heavy but well balanced in a depression in the floor --- once he got it going, it would continue spinning for quite a while. It wasn't his idea, but it was one he'd improved upon. The spinning table allowed him to make the smoothest and most uniform vessels in the region, and quickly too. He made them by the dozens and sold them cheap.

Being in a hurry that day, Elko kicked the table too hard. It lost its balance, and he was just able to leap back as it tipped over and went rolling around the room. It reminded Elko of something he'd seen as a child --- some faint, dream image reaching out from years past. He watched the table rolling until it stopped, then took a breath and went to it. The gods, he was sure, were laughing at him. But after a few minutes of grunting Elko had the table into position and went right back to work. His mind, however, was far from what he was doing.

That night, from the finest of his brick-making clay, Elko made four large round bricks with holes in the exact center. After

a week of drying in the sunlight they were rock hard, and he mounted them onto two poles. Across the poles he put a big, strong basket, fastening it tight. When he was done he tested it out, and it worked just like he thought it would. So, gathering his nerve, he rolled his invention out to his father in the fields. "I made this for you," he said. "This should make it easier to carry in your harvest."

Unko walked around the unlikely contraption, staring. He tried pushing and pulling it back and forth. "Son," he told Elko, "this is very clever." A crowd gathered around, and they tested it by filling it with a large load of grain. With it, one man could carry in more than ten men could carry without it. Everyone agreed that this was indeed very clever, and within a month the whole valley was swarming with copies.

Elko's father still grumbled about his son's choice of profession, but now there was a touch of admiration in his voice. This was enough for Elko. His life seemed complete.

#

The report was titled: Elko Potter, Inventor of the Wheel. Professor Raymond Burns submitted it to Technica along with a copy of the recordings from the temporal viewer. It chronologged his search for the first wheeled cart, tracing it back to one Sumerian potter, then detailed the potter's life from birth to death.

Raymond had been waiting for the call. He'd been sitting in his condo all morning wearing a suit and a tie, ready for the occasion. He couldn't see anything other than complete acceptance, as his thousand-to-one shot project had been a total success. Raymond found Elko at the very last moment. He had to quick-talk his way into another several hours with the temporal viewer so that he could lock it on Elko and scan the man's entire existence.

The call came, and Raymond answered it with a quick, nervous jab at the button. It was Barbara Lemmas, a professor of the Seventh Level, one of Technica's local bigwigs. "Raymond, we've reviewed your project," she said.

"Yes."

"This appears to be a major find. We have to talk about your follow-up research."

"Yes."

"Meet us at Fine Hall, third floor."

"I'm on my way."

Lemmas nodded once and broke the connection. Fine Hall!

Raymond thought. Third floor! It was the domain of the gods.

Technica was to science what the Catholic Church was to religion. There were branches of it everywhere, influencing everything, owning vast fortunes in knowledge and patent rights. And here, in the Livermore Valley of California, was Technica's "Vatican," The Institute of Human Endeavor. Here and only here could one find humanity's only time machines --- three of them, to be exact --- and the only Great Hall of Learning.

The board of directors, all professors of the sixth level and above, sat at a large horseshoe-shaped table around the single stool and podium where Raymond sat and fidgeted. The chairman himself, the "Pope" of Technica, was out of the solar system on a project of his own.

"We congratulate you on your success," Lemmus was saying. "Your method was precise and your supporting evidence very convincing. Elko Potter does indeed seem to be the inventor of the wheel. Your detail of his life is, also, very thorough."

"Thank you, Professor," Raymond said. He allowed himself a modest bow.

"The circumstances of his death also lend itself to our advantage. Suicide in the Euphrates."

"It appeared to be suicide, yes. We won't know for sure until we ask him."

The professors around him nodded, except for Steve Gibson. He was a large-chested man with long flowing white hair and big blue eyes. "I suggest we make that an imperative. Burns should split his next phase into two; one being a covert contact to ask the subject exactly that: Did he really invent the wheel? It is possible that he only recreated it. Perhaps he saw such a thing earlier in his life. If so, then go on with the next phase."

A few of the members of the board nodded at this, but Lemmas --- who was acting director in the Chairperson's absence --- shook her head. "We've all reviewed Professor Burns's data. There is no evidence of the wheel in any temporal scans earlier than Elko Potter's first cart."

"I suggest that his time scans may not have caught earlier incarnations," Gibson said.

"We are all aware that Professor Burns's project may cut into your own research time with the temporal devices, Professor Gibson. I suggest that you let him get on with his project as quickly as possible so that it minimizes delay with yours."

Gibson rolled his eyes but said nothing.

"Now, if there are no further objections, then I would say

Professor Burns has the green light for the second phase of his project." Lemmas stared at Gibson, waiting for him to object. Gibson heaved a loud, disgusted sigh and crossed his arms defensively across his chest, but said nothing. Lemmas turned to Raymond. "Once you submit a detail of your plans," she said, "you shall have what assistance you need and free use of Temporal Transfer Chamber number three."

Raymond exited from the meeting gleefully, carefully avoiding Steve Gibson's smoldering stare.

#

Forty-two years was a long time to be alive. His face lined, his hands hard and stiff with arthritis, Elko the potter could no longer work. His wife was long dead, and his sons had already taken over his trade. He was nothing but a burden on them, now, and so one night with the moon full in the sky --- and having the distinct feeling that he was being watched --- Elko scraped up with dignity he still had and took a walk along one of his late father's canals to the river. There on the shore, he removed his shirt, headpiece, skirt, and sandals, and waded out into the churning muddy water. "I give myself to the gods of Earth and Water," he said, "in thanks for the gift of my life."

The current grew strong and swept him off his feet. He treaded water as he was carried along past the city and out beyond the farmlands. To either side of him were great expanses of moonlit desert, calm and peaceful. Elko felt relaxed, and floated easily. He wasn't in a rush to get it over with. He was reliving memories of his wife and his children.

A ring of lights glared down at him, and there was a harsh sloshing sound as a lot of water tried to climb up the side of a silver wall. It only reached so far, then came surging down in a wave that came back at Elko. He bobbed with it as it passed him, then amazingly the wave hit another silver wall on the other side and came back again. There was a round silver wall completely surrounding him. The ring of lights from above seemed to be mounted on a ceiling. He was in a room!

The water drained quickly and left him splayed in dismay on a cold metal floor. He took a breath and sat up, wincing with the pain and stiffness. Slowly, carefully, he got to his feet and shuffled back and forth, looking at the metal and wondering how he'd arrived here. "Hello?" he said. His voice echoed with a ringing quality. There was no response, so he stood and patiently

waited.

A round hole opened in the ceiling and a ladder dropped into view. A strangely-dressed man climbed down and spoke to him with a thick accent. "I am a friend," he said. "Nothing here will hurt you."

Elko looked him up and down, seeing finely woven cloth of thread so thin you could barely see it, and sandals that covered all of the feet in a black shell like a foot-sized dung beetle. The man's face and smile were oddly disconcerting, and his eyes were a watery green. Without a doubt, this was a god. Which god, Elko had no idea --- but definitely a god. "I am your humble slave," Elko said.

"No, you are my friend. You will understand in time. Come with me."

With difficulty and fear, Elko followed the god up the ladder.

#

They jabbed brightly-polished metal thorns in his arms, which oddly enough brought pleasant waves of relief from the pain in his joints and hands. In four days, they told him, the pain would be gone forever. In the mean time they had provided him with a large rectangular room in a building that seemed to be so big it went on forever, and in this room one whole wall was fashioned out of the purest crystal. Through it he could see a land lush with green grass and gnarled trees, rolling hills, and a reassuring blue sky. Black roads painted with broken yellow lines crossed the landscape. Graceful buildings bigger than any he'd ever seen thrust up out of the ground toward the sky, so skillfully crafted they brought tears to his eyes.

He sat on a soft, high bed and watched as brightly-colored, wheeled machines raced at astonishing speeds along the black roads. Machines also flew through the air, some close and slow, some very far away and traveling very fast. Some of these left long, thin, straight clouds behind them, and as Elko watched these clouds grew fat and translucent and then drifted away.

A smiling, brown-skinned woman and the man who'd first greeted him came to visit and asked how he was adjusting. Elko had no idea what they meant by this, but he told them how grateful he was for the wardrobe of fine, new clothes. They asked him if he would like to learn their language. He said, "Yes, I would be honored."

"We have different methods of teaching than you are used to," the dark-skinned woman said. "They are much faster."

"I am humbled by your vast knowledge," he said, hoping this was appropriate.

"With the language lesson will come knowledge of things you will need in order to understand this new world. The lesson will change the way you view things. Do you understand this?"

"I am anxious to understand your new world," he told them.

"You do not object to the lesson, then?"

"I have no objections."

They led him through a maze of carpeted hallways, spent time in a room called "an elevator" --- which seemed like great magic to Elko --- and finally to a room full of comfortable beds. They had him lie down in one and told him to relax.

"This is a machine that will teach you," he was told. They rolled a metal box over to his bed. The box had numerous colored lights which looked like captive stars, and a headband that was attached to it by a long cord.

"We're going to put this on your head," they told him, showing him the headband. "It will feel odd but it will not hurt you." When they slipped it over his forehead it made all his muscles jump, as if he'd been startled. Then sleep came with a rush.

Through his slumber he dreamed of a stampede of mad oxen trampling through the farmlands, through the town, through his very home. They were possessed by the god of oxen, and that god was furious. The oxen were everywhere, jabbing their horns and crushing with their hooves. They swept everything away; his home, his sons, his grandchildren. He heard women crying in anguish.

When he awoke, it was abrupt. He felt dizzy, and his forehead was damp with cold sweat. He stared up at the boxes with the colored lights and said, "Computer!" The word, even as he said it, startled him, and the concept behind it was bizarre. "Microchip!" he said. "They're made of dirt!" Disoriented as he was, this fact gave him a spasm of joy.

A great understanding seemed to be trying to catch up to him. He could feel it coming up from behind, thundering along on a hundred-thousand mad hooves. Technica! he thought. A church of science! Truth! Great thought! The understanding swept over him, trampling him. Crushing him over and over again. Technica collected the great minds of humanity. They thought he was one of them. They thought he had invented the wheel! Either the god of good fortune was in love with him, or the god of practical jokes.



This was a prank of horrible proportions!

#

Elko sat at the table by himself with his plate of gourmet cafeteria food in front of him, untouched. That day Professor Burns had taken him out on a balcony on the top floor of the West Tower, and let him behold the wonders of 22nd century civilization. It spread like a carpet across the Livermore Valley, covering the mountains to the west and continuing on to the sea. "Wheels," Raymond had told him. "Everywhere you look, you see wheels. It all started with you, Elko. The cart you built for your father. You are the father of everything you see today. The day you put that cart together was the decisive moment in the history of Mankind."

Even with his new found understanding of this alien world called "The Future," this concept still boggled his mind. These people had build a devices that, though manipulating the basic fabric of reality, was able to reach back through the ages and scoop him out of the water. They saved his life and brought him here so they could honor him as the father of technology, and allow him to teach a class in pottery in the Great Hall of Learning.

Here he was, elbow to elbow with the great minds of the ages, just because he put four wheels on two sticks and attached a basket to the top. It didn't make sense to him.

"So, you're the inventor of the wheel." Elko looked up at the man who spoke. He was tall and had a charming smile, and his name tag read, "John Kennedy, Great Political Leader." John introduced himself and shook Elko's hand, then indicated a short, dark-haired man standing next to him. "Elko, this is my good friend Franz. Franz Kafka. He's a famous writer."

Franz shook hands with Elko. "I program computers, now," he said.

"Computers made of dirt! Digital logic!" Elko blurted. He covered his mouth with his hands, and shook his head.

"Recent language upload, eh?" John said. "Don't worry, it calms down after a few days." He and Franz sat down across from Elko, each with their own cafeteria trays. "The foods here's great, isn't it?"

"Preprocessed cloned non-cholesterol!" Elko blurted. "Fabricated meat food product!"

"Amazing, isn't it?"

"I never did like greasy food," Franz said. "It always gave me indigestion."

"It must be a real change for you, Mr. Potter. Food-wise as well as everything else. I heard you made an over seven-thousand year leap."

"Eight-thousand," Franz said. "He's from around six-thousand B.C."

"Before Christ . . . imagine that!"

"Millennium!" Elko blurted. "Cosmos!"

"Wasn't that right around the time of the invention of the written word itself?" Franz said. "Did written language exist during your time period?"

"Hieroglyphics!" Elko's mouth spat the word out violently, then he was able to control himself. He drank some water and took a deep breath. "Crude writing was around. It existed. We regarded it with a mixture of suspicion and awe."

"What do you think of it now?"

"Alphabet!" Once again, Elko put his hands over his mouth. "Information!" he shouted into his hands. "Immortality!"

"In a few days they're going to have you start writing your thoughts and reflections down," Franz said. "It's to give the students a database of quotes they can attribute to you as they're learning."

John leaned forward and whispered, "If you need any help, give Franz here a call. He wrote half of mine for me."

Elko cautiously moved his hands away from his mouth. In a low, uneven voice he said, "Ill keep that in mind, thank you."

#

Elko attended his first cocktail party as Raymond Burn's special guest. It was his first time outside the Technica campus, and his first ride in a car. He kept closing his eyes because things seemed to be coming at him too fast, and by the time they reached Raymond's large round house in the hills he was feeling nauseous.

There were several different levels to Raymond's house, each one reached through the wide circular staircase in the center of the structure. Elko was dazzled by the architecture, and kept running his hands over the smooth, hard surfaces. Concrete! his mind shouted, but by now Elko had learned how to keep it to himself. Clay so hard it turned to stone! The top floor was one large round room with a shallow domed roof ornamented by a

spectacular stained glass skylight. There were over-stuffed chairs, leather couches and ornate wooden cocktail tables everywhere, as well as white-uniformed butlers ready to serve. One white piano stood out near a large window, and next to it stood a large golden harp. To Elko's amazement they played themselves. Computerized! he thought. Automated!

The reason for the party was that Raymond was celebrating his elevation in status from 5th to 6th level professor at Technica. The reason for his elevation, so Elko gathered, was the discovery by Raymond of Elko himself. Elko was considered a very important discovery for Technica, and he was honored as one of the most important additions to the Great Hall.

A cocktail party, as Elko soon discovered, was a loosely-conducted ritual where many people stood around sipping alcoholic drinks and saying meaningful things to each other. Elko was at a loss trying to ascertain what his part in it was, though people kept coming up to him and asking him all sorts of disturbing questions.

"How long did it take you to develop the wheel from concept to working model?"

"How far have you ever tried to calculate the value of  $p$ ?"

"Were you inspired by the moon?"

"Man, what I would have given to be your patent attorney."

"When inventing the wheel, how many different shapes did you go through before deciding on a circle?"

In the middle of this, a very large, imposing man made his way over and stared at him with cold blue eyes. The man had an impressive mane of long white hair, and a deep, grumbling voice that seemed loud even when he was whispering. "You didn't really invent the wheel, did you?" he said. "You got the idea from somewhere else."

The room seemed to be utterly quiet just after the man asked this, and Elko gazed across the room to see Raymond. Raymond looked like he was choking on an ice cube or something. Elko knew instinctively that a lot was riding on this, and he shrugged and said, "My table gave me the idea. It fell over and rolled around the room."

The white-haired man seemed a bit deflated by this answer, but across the room Raymond looked like he could breathe again. Elko guessed that he'd said the right thing. The white-haired man, whose name he found out later was Professor Gibson, muttered something about ideas having to come from "somewhere" but he didn't argue the point.

A week later Elko ran across Raymond at Technica, and Raymond excused himself from a crowd of professors and went to go speak to him. "How're your classes coming along, Elko? Any problems with the students?"

"Oh, no. The students are very bright and respectful." It was true enough, as Elko was thrilled with the electric pottery wheel and the other new developments such as the plastic-based clays. He created bowls, vases and urns so fluid and beautiful they awed the students.

"That's good," Raymond said. "I'm glad to hear it. If any of the little bastards give you any trouble let me know --- he'll be out of here so fast that it'll take thirty seconds for his screams of anguish to catch up to him."

"Well."

"What?"

"Its that, um . . . "

"Someone is giving you a problem?"

"Oh, no. It's me. Something has been bothering me for the last few days, and I think it would be best if I told you about it."

"Well, what? Tell me about it. I don't care what it is, I'll have it solved for you before the day's finished. What?"

"I didn't invent the wheel."

Raymond's look startled Elko. It was as if Raymond's eyes had almost popped out of their sockets. Then he quickly looked back and forth down the long, wide hall to see if anyone had been near enough to hear. "Let's not discuss this here," Raymond said in a strained voice. "Follow me." He led the way to his office, then ushered Elko quickly inside and shut and locked the door behind them. "Okay," he said, "what is this nonsense?"

"I don't belong here with these people," Elko said. "I'm not one of the great minds of humanity."

"Don't be silly! You belong here more than most of those other idiots in the Great Hall!"

"I feel like a fraud, Raymond."

"This has something to do with Gibson, doesn't it? What has he said to you?"

"He knows that I didn't invent the wheel."

"But you did invent the wheel! I saw you do it!"

"No, I recreated something I saw as a child. There was a group of nomads, and they had an oxen pulling a giant basket which rolled on wheels. I was five, maybe six years old, and they were off in the distance. It was a strange sight, and it always stuck

in my mind --- but it never occurred to me to duplicate their cart until that one day when my potting wheel tipped over."

Raymond was silent for a moment, looking very agitated. "This is absolute nonsense!" he finally blurted. "This memory of yours could have been a dream for all we know! A product of your own imagination. As a matter of fact, it could have been a very recent dream brought on by post-hypnotic suggestion because of that damn Steve Gibson!"

"No----"

"Yes, Elko! Yes. Your mind can easily play tricks upon you. Memories are fragile, unreliable things. Every time you remember something it gets restored, and every time it gets restored it is restored slightly different. Every time you remember something you change your memory. It gets to the point that you're remembering memories of memories of memories, and it becomes very unreliable. Things that you swear happened to you as a child are in actuality memories of dreams. I myself for years swore that as a child I saw a news report about a giant frog being found during World War Three, and have vivid memories of photos of this giant frog being towed into the San Francisco bay by an aircraft carrier. This never happened! I dreamed it. Don't you see?"

"No," Elko said. "I saw those nomads. That's where I got the idea for using wheels. I didn't invent it."

"Shut up!" Raymond yelled. "God damn you, you little Sumerian bastard! What are you trying to do to me? You want to wreck my career! I don't give a damn about what you remember. History shows that you invented the wheel, and that's final."

"But----"

"You just forget about it! I swear to god, if you blab this to anybody, it'll be the hardest on you! You, Elko! I saved your god damned ass right out of the Euphrates, and I can put it right back in there. We have a clone of you growing right now, did you know that? A clone that we have to send back in time to replace you in your death. It wouldn't be hard at all for me to keep the clone here and sent you back with a rock strapped to your back. Do you understand me? Do you, Elko?"

"Yes."

"Have you said a word about this to anyone else?"

"No."

"Are you absolutely sure?"

"Yes."

"Okay, then. Forget about it. I mean it, if you open your mouth and destroy everything I worked on, my whole god damned

career, you'll be right back in that river. You have my promise on that!"

Elko left Raymond's office with the promise still ringing in his ears. All through the day he kept trying not to think about it. During his classes he tried not to think about it. During dinner that night, in Franz's apartment, he was consciously not saying anything about it.

"It's absurd," John was saying, "they bring me here and they expect me to teach politics and leadership. But they won't let me join in their politics or lead anybody. Have you gentlemen noticed that, honored as we're supposed to be, we're not really citizens in this society? We're not. We more resemble possessions than anything else. Items in a collection. Pass the salt, would you, Elko?"

Elko passed the salt, consciously not saying anything.

"I know the feeling," Franz said. "They brought me here and filled my head with this Esperanto language, interpreted the way they wanted it to be interpreted, then sat me in front of a class and expected me to teach creative writing. How can I teach these kids how to write, especially in a class? The best thing I say to them is, 'Lock yourself alone in a room and write your thoughts.' And another thing, they set me in front of a word processor and say, 'Write anything you like.' On a word processor? How can you concentrate on writing with a word processor? It's the most fascinating device I've ever seen, so much so that I'm more interested in the word processor than my writing. I find that this computer device can do so much more than word processing, and that I can use it to do just about anything. So I learn a programming language and I start writing programs. Is Technica happy? Are they supportive? No, they want me to write fiction. Well, fiction writing was the first part of my life. They give me a new life, I take up a new career. If we had computers back in the old days I never would have been a writer."

Elko's silence broke. He couldn't help it. "Professor Burns told me today that they're growing a clone of me to send back in time to die in my place."

"That is so that they don't change history," Franz said. "As if they were able to do such a thing. They have to act like they can change history, though, to be able to time travel. What actually happened, though, is that you never did drown in that river. Your clone did."

That's not for certain, Elko thought, but he said nothing.

"It's just like I never really died in that ghastly

sanitarium in Kierling, my clone did. And John here was never shot by a sniper."

"Thank god for that," John said.

"So, then, all these things in history never actually happened?"

"No. Not to us."

"Then it's a lie?"

"Yes," Franz said.

"For an institute dedicated to truth, this whole place seems to be built on lies," John said. "It's ironic, really. It's not much different from when I was . . . alive? There's an odd thought."

"You think of yourself as dead?" Elko said.

"Yes, I do, or at least part of me does."

Franz nodded emphatically at John. "I feel that the Franz they pulled out of the death bed was a different Franz that is alive and talking to you here and now."

"I feel like I am dead," Elko said. "Or at least, I feel like I'm supposed to be dead. It's not like I want to die, though, it just feels like I'm not really alive."

"It's the lack of free will," John said. "What passes for free will for us is an illusion. We're not really free. We can't walk out of here and say, 'I quit.' What kind of life is this?" He looked at Elko and at Franz. "Gentlemen, I'm going to level with you. I've been thinking about this for a long time. I say we should get the hell out of here."

"I agree with you, but I don't see how it would be possible," Franz said. "They have the time devices, they can see where we went and be there before we get there."

"The time devices put us at a severe disadvantage," John said. "But they have a weakness. Aren't all of them controlled by one central computer?"

Franz nodded.

"You're the programmer, Franz. What can we do?"

Franz thought for a moment, then his eyes brightened. "The computer is programmed, by law, not to let anyone use the time devices for traveling into the future, or anywhere shorter than a hundred-twenty-five years in the past. It's a black-out program, locking the controls out of a certain range."

"Why can't they travel back within the last one-hundred-twenty-five years?" Elko asked.

"The time travel law states that there should be no possibility of interfering with the past of anyone alive in the

present," John told him. "It's one in a series of laws restricting what Technica can do with time travel."

"It's also one we can definitely use to our advantage," Franz said. "Give me a day or so to work out the details. I think we can do it." He nodded to himself, looking more cheerful than Elko had ever seen him. "I think it is entirely possible."

#

It was two weeks later when they made their move. Elko was walking down the ramp from the fifth level commons to the Temporal Studies Complex, as planned, when he ran into Professor Raymond Burns. "Hello Elko. Looking for me?"

Elko fidgeted. "Not really."

"Where are you going, then?"

"I was going to go take a look at the time devices. To observe."

"You don't have access, Elko."

"Oh." Actually Elko did have access, as Franz had raised Elko's access level in the computer system. He couldn't tell that to Raymond, though.

Raymond looked at his watch. "Actually, my schedule's free for the next hour. Come with me, I'll give you a personal tour."

Unable to think of a reasonable reason not to accept, Elko went along with him. The guard door took Raymond's full hand print, voice print, and retinal scan before letting them inside. Beyond was a curved hallway which encircled the high-energy fusion plant, and which led to each of the three surrounding temporal study labs. While Raymond paused and was explaining something about the power plant, Elko caught a glimpse of Franz in the corridor ahead. He'd seen Raymond and ducked back around the curve, out of sight. After a few moments both Franz and John came into sight, walking quickly around the curve toward them. They had Raymond surrounded before he recognized either of them.

"My goodness, what are you two doing here?" Raymond asked.

John grabbed the back of Raymond's suit collar and pressed a ball-point pen against Raymond's head. "You feel that?" John said. "That's a cerebral disrupter set at full. Don't force me to scramble your cortex."

"What is this?" Raymond said, his voice rising in astonishment. "What do you think you're doing?!"

"Keep silent and do as we tell you."

"What are you doing?" Elko exclaimed.



"We only have five minutes to get out of here," Franz told him. "We have no other choice but to take him with us."

"Take me?" Raymond said. "Take me where?" Already they were dragging him down the hall to the door of the closest temporal study lab.

Elko watched in confusion and horror. "We can't take him with us!"

"If we let him go, we won't get out of here," Franz said. "The options are that we give up, or we let him go and get caught, or we take him with us, or we kill him."

"Kill me!? Don't do that!"

"Only if you force us to," John said, winking at Franz. He still had the ball-point pen pressed against the back of Raymond's head. They entered Temporal Transfer Chamber #1 and John forced Raymond to lie face-down on the floor, his hands together behind his head. "Elko, keep him covered. If he tries anything, push this button." Out of Raymond's sight, he handed Elko the pen and winked several times.

Deception! Elko's mind shouted. Subterfuge! He nodded and sat down on Raymond's shoulders, the pen pressed against the back of the Professor's head. John and Franz disappeared out of the chamber to set the final variables.

"Elko, why are you a part of this?" Raymond whispered. "What do you hope to accomplish?"

"We're quitting Technica."

"My God, why?"

"Corruption and hypocrisy."

The skin on the back of Raymond's neck was flushing a deep red. "You think you can escape corruption and hypocrisy by leaving Technica?!" he said. "Good luck, Elko. Good goddamn luck! If there's one thing I've learned in all the studies of man throughout the ages, is that there is no escape from corruption and hypocrisy!"

"I don't doubt this," Elko said. "We want to leave nonetheless."

"Elko, you can't get away with it. Think about it. They'll know where you went simply by watching you go with one of the other time devices. You can't escape, it's impossible!"

"Franz thinks differently."

"It's madness, Elko! If you let me go, I can end this and I'll make sure you're not a part of it. I can keep you clear from it."

"Sorry, Raymond."

"You owe it to me! I saved your life!"

"I had no choice in the matter. You did it without asking me. It was my time to die, and you took it away. You gained from it. You. Not me. All for you. Then you threatened my life. I owe you nothing, Raymond."

The others came back down the ladder. "It's all set," John said. "The transfer will take place any second now."

"Where are we going?" Elko said.

"Well, we don't precisely know," John admitted. "Franz had to program a random variable into it to prevent them from finding us."

"You can't prevent them from finding you!" Raymond yelled. "You idiots! They're watching us right now!"

"If they are, they're breaking the law," John told him. "You should know that."

"They can still track you down!"

"Not if we travel to a destination within the blackout zone."

"You can't travel within the blackout zone."

Franz smiled. "You can if you reprogram the central computer."

There was a deep puffing sound, like air suddenly escaping out of a big tank, and a sudden, intense concussion like being in a train wreck. All of them fell a foot or so onto hot dry soil, and there was a half-dozen startled screams. Robes fluttering in the wind, a crowd of people scattered away from them, heading in all directions.

John pushed himself up into a sitting position, and dusted off his jacket. "Say," he said, "Franz, this doesn't look like the black-out zone to me."

Raymond got to his feet, staring off at the people they'd just frightened. "You idiots! I can't believe you pulled this stunt!"

John helped both Franz and Elko to their feet. Elko stared around him, feeling like he was in a dream. The barren landscape above and the farm fields below were all very familiar.

"All that I was saying," Franz said, "were things I had to say, because Technica will hear it. It is not the truth."

"I should say not!" Raymond said. "This is the cradle of civilization. Technica's going to be here any second to take us back. You idiots!"

Elko looked longingly at the farmland.

"I couldn't actually disable the black-out program," Franz told John. "But I could make it look like I did. My program chose

this destination, sent us here, erased itself, and then crashed the computer. It'll be days before they'll be able to get it going again, and there's no way for them to see where we went. They'd have to scan all of time."

"That's what you think," Raymond said. "They'll find us any second."

"You scanned this region yourself during your project, Raymond. Did you ever see us here?"

Raymond started a reply, but stopped, his mouth hanging open. "You fools! You idiots!" He turned away from them, raging. "You've stranded us here! Here! Look at that village, Elko hasn't even invented the wheel yet! Of all the places you could have picked, you stranded us in this place!"

"It's the cradle of civilization," Franz said defensively.

"Where else would we have greater opportunities? We have all of history ahead of us."

"Idiots!"

John looked bemused. "Well, I suppose to survive we're going to have to start some sort of enterprise. Elko my friend," he said, patting him on the shoulder, "let's go build you a pottery shop somewhere. Once we get ourselves established, I'll run for office." He and Franz laughed. Elko, still dazed, managed a smile. They headed off over the hill with Raymond, still cursing and grumbling, tagging behind.

#

It was a year later when a young Elko, awakened from his sleep by strange noises, looked out his window and saw the nomads and their strange contraption. An oxen driven cart --- on wheels --- with the strange markings painted on the side: "John & Franz's Traveling Medicine Show" Of course the young Elko couldn't read Esperanto. He was fascinated by the wheels though, as the cart lumbered past and disappeared into the gloom. He returned to his bed and fell asleep, the thought still in his head. Round things spinning, turning, moving . . .

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